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13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words) This research sought information on whether soldiers believe the assurance of confidentiality they receive in a standard Army survey and, if not, what reasons they give for not believing it. Participants (n=40), meeting in small homogeneous groups, completed a standard Army survey that asked questions on six topics of varying sensitivity. These same participants also completed a 3-item questionnaire asking about any confidentiality concerns they may have had while filling out the survey. Then, with their completed survey forms in front of them, they took part in a focus group discussion to elaborate on these concerns. This report summarizes the discussions and offers recommendations for further research.				
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**Research Report 1650**

**An Investigation of Respondent Confidentiality  
Concerns in Army Surveys: Data From Ten  
Focus Groups**

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## FOREWORD

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It has long been assumed that individuals will not respond candidly to sensitive survey questions if they believe "the wrong people" will find out how they responded to these questions and link their responses to them personally. Most Army surveys assure confidentiality or anonymity on the assumption that including such assurances frees respondents to answer the questions candidly. What has not been known, however, is the extent to which these assurances are believed by the soldiers who participate in the surveys.

This research presents evidence that soldiers frequently do not believe the assurances of confidentiality or anonymity they are given in Army surveys and indicates some of their reasons for not believing them.



EDGAR M. JOHNSON  
Director

# **AN INVESTIGATION OF RESPONDENT CONFIDENTIALITY CONCERNS IN ARMY SURVEYS: DATA FROM TEN FOCUS GROUPS**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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### **Requirement:**

It has become standard practice for organizations conducting sample surveys to provide appropriate guarantees of confidentiality and, in some cases, anonymity. This research sought information on whether soldiers believe such guarantees and, if not, what reasons they give for not believing them.

### **Procedure:**

Participants ( $n=40$ ), meeting in small homogeneous groups, completed a standard Army survey that asked questions on six topics of varying sensitivity. These same participants also completed a 3-item questionnaire asking about any confidentiality concerns they may have had while filling out the survey. Then, with their completed survey forms in front of them, they took part in a focus group discussion to elaborate on these concerns.

### **Findings:**

With respect to the first part of the objective, responses to an objective questionnaire indicated that only 18 of the 40 participants (45%) routinely believed the confidentiality assurances they were given in Army surveys, and only 23 of them (57%) said they believed the assurances they were given in the present survey. (This 57% figure is similar to the 58% figure obtained in a recent Armywide survey.)

With respect to the second part of the objective, there appeared to be three interrelated reasons some soldiers have doubts or uncertainties about the assurances of confidentiality they are given. First, they believed (quite apart from the sincerity they were willing to attribute to those conducting the survey) that it is simply not possible to guarantee confidentiality for survey responses. They believed that survey booklets (or data recorded from these booklets) always stand a chance of being seen, inadvertently or otherwise, by individuals whom the respondents would not want to see them. Second, the soldiers believed that the nature of the background information requested in many Army surveys is such that the various pieces of information could be combined (in the event someone wanted to do so) to identify

particular individuals and connect them with the responses they gave to the substantive items. In other words, in the minds of some soldiers the fact that they are not personally identified in the survey booklet does not mean that they are not identifiable. And third, the soldiers had difficulty articulating a reason for the Army's including many of these background items; in this situation many assumed the worst. Many of them assumed such items to have been included because someone (it wasn't necessary to be able to say whom) wanted to be able to identify them individually.

#### Utilization of Findings:

A portion of the results of this research will be used by the Army Personnel Survey Office (APSO) to aid decision making about relevant matters in future surveys. The results will also be used to design new research to answer some of the questions raised.

# AN INVESTIGATION OF RESPONDENT CONFIDENTIALITY CONCERNS IN ARMY SURVEYS: DATA FROM TEN FOCUS GROUPS

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# AN INVESTIGATION OF RESPONDENT CONFIDENTIALITY CONCERNS IN ARMY SURVEYS: DATA FROM TEN FOCUS GROUPS

## INTRODUCTION

### The Problem

It has long been taken as a given that individuals will not respond candidly to sensitive survey questions if they believe "the wrong people" will be able to find out how they responded to these questions and link their responses to them personally. For some, "the wrong people" are simply any individuals and groups other than those sponsoring and/or conducting the survey, and what these respondents want to be convinced of is confidentiality. When survey instructions tell respondents that their responses will be kept confidential, that records and reports will not link them personally to the data they provide, it is mainly to such individuals as these that the assurance is being directed. For others "the wrong people" are almost anyone with the ability to link them individually to their responses (and this includes those professionally associated with the survey). In these cases, what respondents want to be convinced of is anonymity. And when survey instructions tell respondents that the survey is anonymous and ask them not to put their name or social security number (SSN) anywhere on the form, it is mainly to such individuals as these that the assurance is being directed.

It has become a general practice (in the case of Army surveys, a requirement) for organizations conducting sample surveys to provide appropriate guarantees of confidentiality and in some cases anonymity.<sup>1</sup> What is not clear is the extent to which these guarantees of confidentiality or anonymity are believed by the individuals who participate in these surveys.

Over the years a number of studies have investigated the effect of anonymity and confidentiality assurances on questionnaire responses (e.g., Ash & Abramson, 1952; Boruch & Cecil, 1979; Corey, 1937; Downs & Kerr, 1986; Drake, 1989; Esposito, Agard, & Rosnow, 1984; Fischer, 1946; Fuller, 1974; Futtrell & Swan, 1977; Frey, 1986; Fusilier, & Hoyer, 1980; Hamel & Reif, 1952; Hartnett & Seligsohn, 1967); Houston & Jefferson, 1975; Jones, 1979; Manniche, & Hayes, 1957; McGuire, 1969; Perlin, 1961; Rosen, 1960; Rosenberg, 1969; Singer, Hippler, & Schwarz, 1993; Singer & Miller, 1993; Tyson, & Kaplowitz, 1977; Wildman, 1977; Wilson & Rosen, 1975; Woods &

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<sup>1</sup>There are some, of course, who are unwilling to provide any information about themselves that they are not absolutely required to provide (Singer & Miller, 1993); but such individuals are unlikely to respond to any non-required survey items--particularly if they are asked to identify themselves.

McNamara, 1980). As Singer and her colleagues (e.g., Singer, Hippler, & Schwarz, 1993) have pointed out, however, these studies have not shown clearly that confidentiality assurances improve data quality. In some studies there has been no effect (e.g., Hartnett & Seligsohn, 1967; Reamer, 1987), and in other studies (e.g., experiments in which the topic has intentionally been made non-sensitive--see Singer et al., 1993), assurances of confidentiality have produced negative effects on subjects' willingness to take part in the survey.

Nearly all these studies were conducted by organizations that, unlike the Army, have little or no control over those who respond to their survey; and virtually all of the studies have used non-military samples.<sup>2</sup> The implications of these studies for Army research on this topic would thus appear to be limited to two: (1) Confidentiality assurances can't always be counted on to reduce respondents' concerns about confidentiality and anonymity, and (2) in some situations such assurances can backfire.

### Objective

This research addressed the first of these two implications. Its objective was to obtain information on whether soldiers believe the assurance of confidentiality they receive in a standard Army survey and, if not, what reasons they give for not believing it. The research was designed less to test ideas than to generate them.

## METHOD

### Overview

Participants completed a standard Army survey that asked questions on six topics of varying sensitivity. Afterwards these same participants completed a 3-item questionnaire asking about any confidentiality concerns they may have had while filling out the survey. Then, with their completed survey forms in front of them, they took part in a focus group discussion aimed at elaborating these concerns.

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<sup>2</sup>Wilson and Rosen (1975) collected data from soldiers on the effects of response anonymity. The experiment was what might be called an "imagining" experiment. Subjects were not exposed to actual experimental treatments; rather, they were told about each of several experiment conditions and asked to say how they would respond under each of these conditions.



## Participants

Participants were 40 soldiers: 16 officers and 24 enlisted personnel, as shown below:

- 6 captains (O3)
- 10 lieutenants (O1-O2)
- 3 senior NCOs (E8)
- 10 junior NCOs (E6)
- 11 junior enlisted (E2-E4)

Thirty were male, and ten were female.

## Procedure

In each of 10 small groups, homogeneous in rank/grade, the Investigator administered an omnibus-type survey including items from the fall-1992 and the spring-1993 Sample Survey of Military Personnel (SSMP). The instrument took, on the average, about 28 minutes to complete. When participants had completed the instrument, they didn't turn it in immediately but retained it to refer to during the discussion that was to take place shortly. Participants were then given a brief, 3-item questionnaire concerning confidentiality in surveys (Table 1). When these 3-item questionnaires had been completed, they were collected; and the Investigator proceeded with the discussion, using standard focus group procedures (Krueger, 1988; Merton, 1946, 1990). The approach was that of "retrospective introspection" (Merton, 1990), in which (in the present case) participants were asked, for each topic, (a) what was in their mind when they answered the questions on the topic, (b) whether in responding to these items they recalled being concerned about confidentiality, and, if so, (c) what they were concerned about. Items in the survey varied in sensitivity and addressed such topics as satisfaction with various aspects of Army life, rating of supervisor's leadership, rating of unit, gambling, use of alcohol, and use of drugs. Items were also included that asked about the respondent's military and social demographics, and one item asked the respondent's SSN.

Data were collected in May 1993. Prior to the Investigator's arrival at the post, each participant had been selected<sup>3</sup> and assigned to one of 10 small groups (Table 2); and there were two groups for each of five grade/rank categories: E2-E4, E5-E6, E8, O1-O2, and O3. Two forms of the survey instrument were constructed: one with the demographic items at the beginning and

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<sup>3</sup>The Investigator learned later that any "bad apples" had been removed from the list of potential participants before selections were made.

Table 1

Privacy/Confidentiality Questionnaire

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**Marking Instructions: CIRCLE THE LETTER IN FRONT  
OF THE ANSWER YOU CHOOSE**

1. How many Army surveys (including the survey today) have you completed in the past 12 months--that is, since May of last year?

- a. 1 (The survey today was the only one.)
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5
- f. 6
- g. 7
- h. 8
- i. 9
- j. 10 or more

2. When an Army survey tells you your answers will be kept confidential, do you assume they will be kept confidential?

- a. Yes, usually
- b. Sometimes yes, sometimes no
- c. No, usually not

3. What about this particular survey? The booklet says this survey is confidential and that no effort will be made to trace your answers back to you. Do you believe this?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Table 2

Number and Grade(s) of Participants in Each Group

Group Number	Grade Level of Group Members	Number of Soldiers in This Group
1 . . . . .	E2-E4 . . . . .	6
2 . . . . .	E2-E4 . . . . .	5
3 . . . . .	E6 . . . . .	5
4 . . . . .	E6 . . . . .	5
5 . . . . .	E8 . . . . .	1
6 . . . . .	E8 . . . . .	2
7 . . . . .	O1-O2 . . . . .	5
8 . . . . .	O1-O2 . . . . .	5
9 . . . . .	O3 . . . . .	3
10 . . . . .	O3 . . . . .	3

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the other with these items at the end. For each of the five grade/rank categories, one group received the demographics-first form and the other received the demographics-last form.

## RESULTS

### Responses to Objective Questionnaire Items

Participation in prior surveys. As indicated above, the discussion was preceded by the administration of a 3-item questionnaire; and the responses to these items are displayed in Table 3. The first item (see Table 1) asked how many Army surveys (including the survey just completed) the soldier had completed in the past year. The item was intended mainly as a lead-in to the following question, but it also provided information on the respondent-burden question of how often these soldiers had taken part in an Army survey. Of the 40 participants, 25 (63%) had not during the preceding year completed a survey other than the one they completed for this research; and 13 (33%) had completed only one other survey during this period.

Perception of confidentiality in Army surveys. The second item (Table 1) asked participants whether they assumed that promises of confidentiality in Army surveys would be kept. Of the 40 participants, 18 (45%) said yes, but the remaining 22 (55%) expressed doubts (either "no" or "sometimes yes and sometimes no"). Those most frequently expressing doubts were the NCOs (junior and senior). The third item (Table 1) asked participants whether they believed the assurance of confidentiality they had been given on the survey they had just completed. Of the 40 participants, 23 (57%) said yes, but the remaining 17 (42%) said No. Once again, those most frequently expressing doubts were the NCOs.

### Participant Comments During the Discussions

Standard confidentiality statement. The first page of the survey instrument contained a standard confidentiality statement, and the Investigator probed group members' interpretation of this statement. Some said they had read the statement, and others said they had not. Most, however, said they had just skimmed it. In fact, most said they viewed the inclusion of such a statement as a little more than standard boilerplate; and, in varying degree, most expressed doubt or uncertainty as to whether the assurances would be honored.

Army letter requesting cooperation. The second page of the survey instrument contained a letter from the Deputy Chief of

Table 3

Responses to Questionnaire Items, Shown Separately  
by Respondent Grade/Rank

RESPONDENT GRADE/RANK	QUESTION			RESPONDENT GRADE/RANK	QUESTION		
	1	2	3		1	2	3
<b>JUNIOR ENLISTED</b>				<b>SENIOR NCOs</b>			
1	a	a	a	22	a	c	b
2	a	b	b	23	a	c	b
3	a	a	a	24	a	a	a
4	a	a	a	<b>LIEUTENANTS</b>			
5	a	a	a	25	c	a	a
6	a	a	a	26	a	a	a
7	b	a	a	27	b	a	a
8	a	b	a	28	a	b	a
9	a	c	b	29	a	a	a
10	b	b	b	30	a	c	b
11	a	c	b	31	b	c	b
<b>JUNIOR NCOs</b>				32	a	b	a
12	b	c	b	33	a	b	a
13	a	b	b	34	b	a	a
14	a	a	a	<b>CAPTAINS</b>			
15	a	b	b	35	b	a	a
16	b	a	a	36	b	a	b
17	a	c	b	37	b	c	b
18	d	c	b	38	b	a	a
19	a	b	a	39	a	a	a
20	b	b	a	40	b	c	b
21	a	b	b				

Staff for Personnel (DCSPER) requesting the respondent's cooperation in completing the questionnaire and assuring confidentiality of participants' responses, and the Investigator probed group members' interpretation of this letter. As before, a few said they had read the letter, and a few said they had not; but most said they had just skimmed it. A few said they thought a survey coming from Washington could be trusted to preserve confidentiality more than a survey coming from a local commander, but the rank of the letter writer (here a 3-star general) was generally viewed as not making a difference.

Military and social demographics. The instrument included a variety of military and social demographic items. Military demographics locate the respondent in the military structure, and the following items of this type were included: rank, installation, type of unit, branch or primary MOS, length of time in the Army, and SSN. Social demographics locate the respondent in the larger social structure, and the following such items were included: age, race, ethnicity, gender, and highest level of education. Most participants said they did not know the reason for many of these items and, as a result, tended to be suspicious of the purpose these items' served. A view frequently voiced was that such items could identify (by post, by type of unit, by rank, by race, etc.) the individual who provided the information and that (given a will to use them this way) the items could be used to trace responses back to the individuals who had given them. As a result, many respondents said that if they were concerned about being identified they would omit or falsify responses to such items or, alternatively, falsify their response to the substantive items they were concerned about.

Racial/ethnic concerns. A number of black and hispanic participants made an additional point--viz., that asking for race and ethnicity information in a survey that focuses on "bad things" (discipline problems, use of drugs, etc.) is seen by many as an effort to obtain data that will discredit minority soldiers by showing disproportionate involvement in these problems.

Request for SSN. But far and away the most disliked item was the one that asked respondents for their SSN. Few of the participants were able to articulate a legitimate reason for the survey's including the item, and the fact that it was included reinforced conclusions many had drawn already regarding the "true" purpose of many or most of the demographic items.

Demographics first/last. As noted earlier, the design of the research had provided for two systematically different forms of the survey instrument, one with the demographics at the beginning and the other with the demographics at the end--the purpose being to see whether the nature and/or extent of confidentiality concerns would be different in the two conditions. What happened was that confidentiality concerns were voiced at the outset of

every discussion--regardless of the location of the other demographics. And these concerns, at least initially, were associated with the inclusion of the request for SSN. When the Investigator asked how soldiers usually dealt with such concerns he was told that the solution was simple. If the SSN came at the end of the survey (and the substantive questions were sensitive), respondents could simply omit or falsify their responses to this item (they said they were unlikely to go back and change their answers to the substantive questions.) If the SSN came at the beginning of the survey they had a choice: either omit or falsify responses to the demographic item or omit or falsify their responses to the substantive questions.

Perception of consequences. An effort was made to find out just what participants thought would happen to them if an assurance of confidentiality were violated. For the most part, participants found it difficult to say what they thought would happen. Some said that their unit leaders might harass them, but ideas about this tended to be vague.

Substantive topics in the survey. The instrument included items on the following substantive topics:

- \* Satisfaction/dissatisfaction with Army life
- \* Rating of supervisor's leadership
- \* Rating of unit
- \* Gambling
- \* Use of alcohol
- \* Drugs.

In most cases the group members said that they personally had no confidentiality concerns in responding to any of these questions; but they agreed that "some soldiers" might have such concerns, and the discussion proceeded on the agreed presumption that the discussion concerned other people. Almost all agreed that the order in which the topics were presented in the instrument (see above) was the order of their relative sensitivity: satisfaction with various aspects of Army life was the least sensitive, and drugs was the most sensitive. And all agreed that to the extent individuals found an item sensitive they would either omit or falsify their response to that item or omit or falsify their response to one or more demographics.

## DISCUSSION

The objective of this research was to obtain information on whether soldiers believe the assurance of confidentiality they receive in a standard Army survey and, if not, what reasons they give for not believing it. With respect to the first part of this objective, responses to the questionnaire items indicated that only 18 of the 40 participants (45%) routinely believe the confidentiality assurances they are given in Army surveys, and only 23 of them (57%) said they believed the assurances they were given in the present survey. This 57% figure is similar to the figure (58%)<sup>4</sup> obtained in a recent Armywide survey. Moreover, the doubt and uncertainty that participants expressed in these questions was consistent with what was said in the focus group discussions that followed; and it is consistent also with what Singer and Miller (1993) found in their review of research conducted in civilian populations.

With respect to the second part of the objective, there appeared to be three interrelated reasons for not (or at least not always) believing the assurances of confidentiality or anonymity they received. First, the soldiers tended to believe (quite apart from the sincerity they were willing to attribute to those conducting the survey) that it is simply not possible to guarantee complete confidentiality for survey responses. They tended to believe that survey booklets (or data recorded from these booklets) always stand a chance of being seen (inadvertently or otherwise) by individuals whom the respondents would not want to see them. To the extent therefore that respondents are concerned about such a possibility (item sensitivity would presumably be a factor here), they are likely to become concerned not just about confidentiality but about anonymity as well.

Second, the soldiers tended to believe that the nature of the background information requested in many Army surveys is such that the various pieces of such information could be combined (in the event some one wanted to do this) to identify specific individuals and connect them with the responses they gave to the substantive items. In other words, in the mind of some soldiers the fact that they are not personally identified in the survey booklet does not mean that they are not identifiable. And depending on the sensitivity of these substantive items, such beliefs by respondents could have measurable effects on data quality.

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<sup>4</sup>Data from the spring-1990 Sample Survey of Military Personnel (SSMP), which is administered by the Army Personnel Survey Office.



Third, the soldiers had difficulty articulating a reason for the Army's including the background items; and in this situation many assumed the worst. Many of them assumed such items had been included because some one (it wasn't necessary to be able to say who) wanted to be able to identify them individually.

What is suggested by these observations is that for some soldiers (and, in the case of particularly sensitive topics, possibly most soldiers) concerns about confidentiality lead easily to concerns about anonymity. The more the sensitiveness of some personally relevant item stimulates concern about confidentiality, the more respondents indicated they would be concerned about anonymity. And the more respondents are convinced their responses cannot be linked to them personally, the more likely they will be (when asked a sensitive question) to respond candidly.

### Participant Suggestions

Participants were asked what they suggested as a way of reducing soldiers' confidentiality concerns in responding to a survey like the one they had just completed. Their suggestions are listed below:

- a. Don't ask for SSN or name.<sup>5</sup>
- b. Don't ask for any demographic/background information.
- c. Make optional the providing/omitting of any demographic information requested
- d. Don't ask for any demographic/background information that is not essential for the stated purpose of the survey,<sup>6</sup>
- e. Explain the reason for items that are included.
- f. Tell who will use the information and how.

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<sup>5</sup>Wilson and Rosen (1975), based on the results of their experiment with soldiers, recommended that "the respondent's social security number should not be required" (p.vi).

<sup>6</sup>Wilson and Rosen (1975) also said that "the background information gathered in anonymous surveys should be greatly reduced or eliminated in order to ensure that respondents will feel that they in fact will be anonymous." (p. vi.)

Two participants recalled instances in which their belief in survey confidentiality had been reduced by factors that had nothing to do with the survey instrument. One participant said he had seen a completed survey form lying face up on an NCO's desk; the other said his own POC had given him a survey form without an accompanying envelope and that, as instructed, he had returned the completed form to the POC without such an envelope.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

The information obtained suggest a number of possibilities for research. The following are variables that could be manipulated (alone or in combination) in experimentally created survey forms to assess their effect on data quality.

- a. Nature of (explicit or implicit) identifying information requested<sup>7</sup>
  - \* SSN
  - \* Military demographics
  - \* Societal demographics
  - \* None
- b. Option/no option to omit background information
- c. Large/small number of demographic items included
- d. Location of demographics in the survey instrument (beginning/end)
- e. Alerting/not alerting respondent to the inclusion of background items in the survey and providing/not providing a plausible justification
- f. Printing/not printing tracking number on answer sheet (to allow for follow-up of nonrespondents)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Not requesting demographic information makes it impossible to conduct subgroup analysis, which is an important objective of most surveys.

<sup>8</sup>If respondents (or potential respondents) see a tracking number on their questionnaire and believe it is intended for purposes other than that of simply determining who has and has not returned the questionnaire, the mere inclusion of such a number could undermine other efforts to assure confidentiality and/or anonymity.

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